Our Lady of the Isles:
Contexts & Continuums

Student: 10001361
BA (Hons) Fine Art 4th Year Dissertation

Madonna and Child of the Rocket Range

Madonna and child

Below the watch tower

Your one defence

A cold shoulder turned on perpetual lights

Tracking down our innocence

In the gentle falling of day

From Rueval hill

To the wide sea

The sun rolls as red as any blood

Crimson fingers supplicating

Before cliffs of darkness

And you, impenetrable, pencil slim

An icon for a new age

In creamy understated folds

Your hesitant smile

Hopeful as any mother,

You hold your child aloft

Knowing he will make his mark

Far beyond Ground Zero and Guantanamo

To the end of all of our remorseful days

Though all our yesterdays are pulverised to earth.

Marion F. Morrison (Morrison, 2018: 7)

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Abstract

The statue of *Our Lady of the Isles* and the wayside shrines of South Uist, that were erected in the 1950s, are central to this study. The story of their creation, their iconography and continuing relevance are explored initially. They are placed within the historical context of the evolving myth and changing iconography of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism. The roles, as queen, patron and protector, which are particularly relevant to her position in South Uist, are examined in more detail.

The statue and shrines are placed within the island context of the geography, history and manner of worship of the contrasting Christian faiths of Catholicism and Presbyterianism. The particular reverence for Mary within island Catholicism, also evident in other Marian sites, is traced to its origins in Celtic Christianity. Through her close relationship with Saint Bride, a Christianised version of the Celtic Goddess Brigde, a connection is suggested with earlier mother goddess figures.

The Virgin Mary is then considered within the wider history of the Mother Goddess myth, clear connections being found with Bronze age goddesses whose stories she replicates. The implication that she is part of a goddess continuum originating in the Palaeolithic era, and the Great Mother Goddess myth itself, are critically examined.

The findings of this study, particularly insights into the political as well as spiritual roles of the Virgin Mary, have brought a greater understanding of the symbols recurring in my creative practice. The persisting reverence for the divine feminine in South Uist, together with the suggestion that Mary can be placed within a continuity of island worship back to the goddess immanent in the landscape, has given a profound sense of connection between where I live and the preoccupations of my work.

Introduction

On first visiting South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, I was astonished to pass a glass-fronted shrine at the side of the road, just beyond the causeway from Benbecula. On the façade was *Failte Dhut A Mhoire* (Hail Mary) picked out in small pebbles, with a ring of scallop shells above and a statue of the Virgin Mary inside. A little further on, I saw a strikingly tall and elegant statue of the *Madonna and Child*, looking across a wide swathe of moor and *machair* out towards the Atlantic. I came across several more wayside shrines in the area, recalling those I had encountered in the Swiss Italian Alps. Having not seen anything like this in the United Kingdom before, I wanted to know more. I discovered there was an extraordinary story behind the erecting of the statue and shrines in the 1950s.

In this study I investigate the story of *Our Lady of the Isles* and the wayside shrines and consider the historical contexts from which they emerged. This Includes the myths and iconography of the Virgin Mary, particularly in relation to her roles evoked in South Uist; the contrasting faiths of the Outer Hebrides, and Mary's place in Celtic Christianity and within the myth of the Mother Goddess. I consider whether the particular reverence for Mary in South Uist and Barra that gains full expression in the statue and shrines, is perhaps a living link with earlier mother goddess worshipping cultures, traces of which lie in the overlay of St Brigid on the pre-Christian Goddess Brigde.

In this journey from a twentieth century sculpture on South Uist to the ancient Mother Goddess myth of Western culture, we will first consider the story of *Our Lady of the Isles* and then look at the wayside shrines and the sculpture itself.

Figure 1. Hew Lorimer (1958) Our Lady of the Isles (O'Connor 2018)

Our Lady of the Isles

The Story

The imposing granite statue of *Our Lady of the Isles* (*Bana thighearna nan Eilean*) (fig. 1) stands on the hillside of Ruabhal overlooking the parish of Ardkenneth, South Uist, and behind it are a watchtower and two white 'golf balls' of a military installation. The statue was commissioned by the Roman Catholic parish priest Canon John Morrison and erected in 1958. According to John Watts in *A Record of a Generous People:* a history of the Catholic Church in Argyll and the Isles, it was a major part of the local response to the 1953 plans by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), to build a rocket testing range and military base at Gerinish as a key part of Britain's Atlantic defence in the cold war (Watts, 2013: 211). Although

initially welcomed for the work it would provide, when the considerable extent of the MoD plans, and the intended clearance of the communities of Gerinish and Iochdar, became apparent, attitudes changed. Realising that they were regarded as expendable by distant bureaucrats, the people of the area felt the plans threatened not only their homes but also their Gaelic language and traditional culture (Watts, 2013: 211).

Canon Morrison led the campaign of opposition to the plans (MacDonald, 2018). His response to them was quoted in The Oban Times:

> Whether a missile range is essential or not, it is a devilish thing and it should not be assigned to the paradise of Uist. This is a giant Colossus which will absorb us and Uist will disappear (Anon, 1955 cited in Forrest, 2009: 12).

The current parish priest Fr Michael MacDonald described Canon Morrison as a "shrewd, intelligent, politically and media savvy character". His approach involved using his contacts and the national media on the one hand, and on the other locally, leading his parishioners in both a deepening and a visual expression of their island spirituality which was especially devoted to the Virgin Mary (MacDonald, 2018). Her Gaelic name *Moire* is used for no other Mary, and *Moire ro Naomh nan Eilean* (Mary Most Holy of the Isles) is the title given the Church's blessings by an Apostolic Delegation that had travelled to South Uist in the early 1950s (Watts, 2013: 212).

By happy co-incidence 1954 was declared a Marian year by the Vatican. Fr Morrison initiated the custom of the circulation of a statue of *Our Lady* around parish homes for daily community gatherings, to say the rosary, which continues today. There were also a number of shrines erected in Mary's honour along the proposed military routes which were intended not only to support the spirituality of the local people but to give a very clear message to the military incomers that "a different way of life and different values" prevailed here (MacDonald, 2018 & Watts, 2013: 212).

It was during this year that Canon Morrison came up with the proposal to erect a statue of *Moire ro Naomh nan Eilean* overlooking the site of the range. He chose Hew Lorimer, a foremost classical sculptor, whose major work between 1950 and 1956 was the design and carving of figures on the façade of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh (Historic Environment Scotland, 2007). Lorimer had been apprenticed to Eric Gill and was a devout Roman Catholic himself (Forrest, 2009: 23/29). He direct-carved his design of a tall mother figure with her child high on her shoulder and this is the original 9-foot-high sculpture which now stands outside St Michael's Church, Ardkenneth (Forrest, 2009: 54). The sculpture on Ruabhal is 27 feet 9 inches high, made of especially quarried Creetown granite and was carved elsewhere by Lorimer's collaborator, stonemason Maxwell Allen (Forrest, 2009: 46), with only finishing touches to the face being carved in situ (MacDonald, 2018).

Until Antony Gormley's 1988 sculpture *Angel of the North,* it was the largest single figure sculpture in Britain, quite an achievement for a tiny island community with a subsistence economy of crofting and fishing (Watts, 2013: 215). Canon Morrison petitioned his many contacts elsewhere, and islanders worked hard to raise money, as well as donating labour and materials, particularly for the foundations and approach road which local people of all denominations were involved with building. It seems unclear what the sculpture cost, between £6,000 and £12,000 was Fr Michael's suggestion – a parish debt that Fr Morrison's successors struggled for many years to repay (MacDonald, 2018). There was considerable local disquiet about the cost but as a local resident said, "back then, what the Priest said went" (Anon, 2018).

The strength of local opposition to the MoD plan, its expression in the Marian statue and shrines and a negotiating team from Gerinish, finally got through to the Ministry of Defence. By 1959 the proposals were reduced considerably: no-one was to be cleared, there would be guaranteed work for locals, restrictions on firing times and compensation 'displacement money' paid when the range was in use, which is still paid today (Watts, 2013: 2015).

Figure 2. 17th August 2008 Rededication of Our Lady of the Isles (Macdonald, n. d.)

This is the story according to the current parish priest, local residents and official Roman Catholic sources including Watts' book (MacDonald, 2007 & 2018 & Watts, 2013: 211-215). However, some interesting conflating of events in time have created, and continue to maintain, the myth that the Marian statue and shrines were instrumental in curtailing the MoD's plans. South Uist ceramicist, Miranda Forrest, in her 2009 dissertation, went back to original sources, including government papers, contemporary newspapers and the sculptor Hew Lorimer's family archive, to discover the actual timing of events (Forrest, 2009: 11-19).

Our Lady of the Isles and the wayside shrines were planned in 1953 and begun before anyone was aware of the MoD's intentions, which were not declared until July 1955 (Forrest, 2009:11 & 15). The statue and shrines were created in response to the Vatican's declaration of 1954 as The Marian Year, as they were in many other parts of the Roman Catholic world including most relevantly to Uist: Ireland and Canada (Forrest, 2009: 10). The site for the sculpture at Ruebhal was chosen and Hew Lorimer first approached in 1953 (Forrest, 2009:11) but by the time *Our Lady of the Isles* was erected in 1958, she had become synonymous with the campaign of opposition. The fact that she is placed centrally overlooking the Rocket Range was a remarkable coincidence which contributed to the myth

(Forrest, 2018:14). Hew Lorimer commented at the time: "I did not imagine that anyone would be so uncivilised as to locate a rocket range near my statue" (Anon, 1958 cited in Forrest, 2009:14)

Forrest details the many factors that contributed to the curtailment of the MoD's plan including a reduced budget, changes in defence policy, and a government reporter sympathetic to the crofters in Lord Carrington (Forrest, 2009:18-19). However, it was the educated and erudite Canon Morrison who petitioned him, wrote letters to government ministers and put the Gaelic speaking congregation into the public eye (Forrest, 2009:12). Described as 'plucky islanders' in the press, this David and Goliath story drew much interest nationally and may well have influenced the Government decision (Ross, 1959). A 1959 article in the *Catholic Fireside* conflated the statue and the diminished MoD plan, in stating that the islanders had faith in her as '"The Queen of Peace"' who 'would solve their problems' and that eight months after her unveiling the government had changed its mind (Ross, 1959).

The Continuing Relevance of *Our Lady of the Isles*

One of the most enduring aspects of the story of *Our Lady of the Isles* is the way in which she continues to be seen as the protector of South Uist, both specifically and generally (Bremner, 2018). Ironically, The Range –as it is a known locally– has meant the survival of the community, because of its provision of well-paid employment, but the rockets themselves are still seen as a threat (Bremner, 2018). The original 'rockets' being tested were *Corporal* missiles intended to carry nuclear warheads, which were notoriously unreliable, and one went astray in 1966, narrowly missing houses and crashing into Loch Druidibeg, miraculously without casualties (MacDonald, 2006: 67). The South Uist poet Marion F. Morrison, whose poem *Madonna and Child of the Rocket Range,* written in

2003/4, is included as the frontispiece, sees *Our Lady of the Isles* and the military

installations on Ruebhal as explicit symbols of war and peace. However, she believes that

"goodness will prevail" and that *Our Lady,* is ultimately the more powerful (Morrison, 2018).

Figure 3. Third shrine, Iochdar, South Uist (O'Connor 2018)

Figure 4. Wayside Shrine, Vallemaggia, Switzerland (O'Connor 2001)

The Wayside Shrines

Wayside shrines are a feature of many countries where Roman Catholicism is the prevailing

religion and are therefore uncommon in Britain. In Vallemaggia in the Swiss Italian Alps, for

example, there are many shrines on mountain paths, roads, and in the centre of villages:

shrines that have been there as long as people can remember (fig.4). The Virgin Mary (and

saints) depicted are seen as intercessors to God, protecting the village and those travelling

in the mountains (Pauli, 2018).

The seven wayside shrines of South Uist loosely outline the parish, although the furthest from the Ardkenneth church, at Stilligarry, is intriguingly empty. Some are by the roadside and others in fields (fig.3) and they are actually all orientated towards the church, not towards 'planned military roads' as these were as yet unknown in the year of their erection (Forrest, 2018).

The shrines, made of stone and cement, each have a glassed-in niche with a few steps at the front, and were built and continue to be well maintained by individual local people (MacDonald, 2018). All have conventional statues of the Madonna and Child or Mary in prayer, made of plaster or fibreglass and purchased from church suppliers (MacDonald, 2018). In the shrine on the roadside at Iochdar (fig. 6), which has the most complex building and the smallest niche, the Madonna is oddly truncated, a miscalculation which meant the statue had to be cut off at the knees (MacDonald, 2018). She is holding the child in a tender embrace and wears a diadem. Of all the Uist shrine figures this is the most compelling and is based on Gothic sculptural motifs combining queen and mother.

Figure 5. First shrine, Iochdar, South Uist (O'Connor 2012)

Iconography of Our Lady of the Isles

Our Lady of the Isles is a tall, graceful, crowned figure with the Christ-Child held high above her shoulder so that his arm rests on the top of her head. This posture echoes that of *Vierge d'Alsace* by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (fig. 6) a bronze in the National Galleries of Scotland Collection with which Lorimer was familiar and by which, he realised, after the carving of *Our Lady*, he had been influenced (Forrest 2009: 38). Bourdelle's figure was in turn inspired by French Gothic sculpture of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (National Galleries of Scotland, n.d.), the period when Mary was most venerated as *Queen of Heaven* (Warner, 2000: 316). *Our Lady of the Isles* being crowned, places her firmly within this Gothic tradition, an example of which is the Madonna and Child from the Trumeau of the Central Portal of the West Facade of Reims Cathedral (Fig. 7).
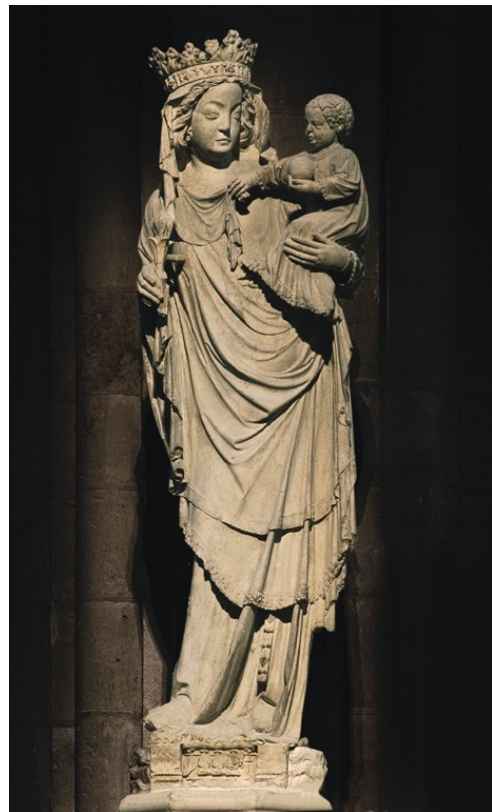

Figure 6. E A Bourdelle: Vierge d'Alsace 1919-1921 (National Galleries of Scotland, n.d.)

Figure 7. Madonna & Child, Reims Cathedral (Anon., n. d.)

While the child held high is a feature of many images of Mary, there appear to be none historically where he is higher than his mother, as in these twentieth century sculptures. This is also true of *Our Lady Star of the Sea,* the statue raised in the Marian Year on Barra. With the child placed above her, the crowned image of *Our Lady of the Isles* combines sovereignty with humility, a quality which was later attributed to the Virgin (Warner, 2000:183). Fr Michael refered to her as a "Celtic princess" and said the face was modelled on that of a local girl (MacDonald, 2018). She has a serene, broad, high cheek-boned face which could be seen as an 'island' face, useful in local identification with her, as is her downward gaze which is inclusive of the viewer.

We will next look at how the story and iconography of Our Lady of the Isles sit within the history of mariolatry and examine in more detail the political roles ascribed to her that are relevant to Uist.

The Virgin Mary

The Myth of the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary, one of the foremost subjects of western art, is held in great reverence in the history of Christianity and lives on in popular images in Roman Catholicism worldwide. Representing "motherhood in its fullness and perfection" (Warner, 2000: 192) and occupying a mediating position because she belongs to both earth and heaven, her special worship, as the most exalted of beings is *hyperdulia* (above saints and angels), next only to God in her level of veneration (Warner, 2000: xxiv)*.* However, Mary is barely mentioned in the Bible beyond simply being the mother of Christ: "[her] appearances in the New Testament are startlingly small plunder on which to build the great riches of Mariology" (Warner, 2000: 19). Her importance rose, and in AD 431 she was named *Theotokas,* (God-Bearer) at the Council of Ephesus and not until the fourth century was her virgin motherhood declared (Baring, 1991: 550). Her popularity increased and while legends and apocryphal gospels were written about her (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1998: 240), her myth was –and is– primarily conveyed through her image.

Marian Iconography

The Virgin Mary has been depicted in many different ways over the centuries, reflecting her evolving status in the popular imagination and in the politics of church and state. Initially shown on a grand scale in the imperial iconography of Rome and in fourth century Byzantine mosaics, she was later depicted in the small-scale painted icons of the sixth century, believed to facilitate direct communication with the sacred figure (Lloyd 1987: 220). Challenged by eighth century *Iconoclasm*, standardized images were established, and she

could be depicted, for example, with 'the Child caressing her cheek', as in the *Theotokas of Vladimir* (fig.8) (Lloyd 1987: 220).

Figure 8. Theotokas of Vladimir (12th C) (Alekseyenko, 2008)

In the Medieval Gothic period the great Marian cathedrals were built in her honour as *Queen of Heaven*: eighty cathedrals and one hundred churches in France alone, over a hundred-year period, where, in magnificent stained glass and carvings, she was crowned, enthroned and clothed in glorious robes and insignia (Warner, 2000: 316).

Mary later inspired some of the most beautiful imagery of the Renaissance, in which artists treated "the divine as an extension of the real world" and recognisable people and settings were depicted in religious art (Lloyd 1987: 221). In this period of burgeoning Christian literature and apocrypha, new themes developed in Marian imagery including the Immaculate Conception, *Madonna del Latte, The Pieta* and complex Nativity scenes (Lloyd 1987: 220). The Immaculate Conception, meaning Mary *herself* was conceived without

sexual congress, making her exempt from the stain of original sin, was the subject of long debate (but was not actually declared official church doctrine until 1854) (Baring, 1991, p. 553).

Figure 9. Filippo Lippi (c.1400-1469) The Adoration of the Child (Bernard, 1987: 58)

Originating from the highly influential visions of St Bridget of Sweden (d.1373), stripped of her symbols of queenship, the Madonna of Humility first appears, as Mary giving birth on her knees and immediately bowing down in worship of her son (fig.9) (Warner, 2000: 183). Here she displays, as Marina Warner says in *Alone of All Her Sex,* the "sweetness,

submissiveness and passivity that permit her to survive [as] a Goddess in a patriarchal society" (Warner, 2000: 191).

Figure 10. Piero Della Francesca (c.1416-1492) Madonna Della Misericordia (Bernard, 1987: 82)

In the same period, she is depicted without the Christ-child, as the *Madonna Della Misericordia* (fig. 10) the Madonna of Mercy, with her great cloak sheltering her flock. A popular image of the fourteenth century Black Death, she offers protection to those working with the dying –the hooded figures– and mediates with God on behalf of sinners on their way to hell (Warner, 2000, p. 327). During this period the *Hail Mary,* formerly a salutation, became a prayer ending 'pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death' addressed to her as *intercessor* (Thurston, 1910). While the church may emphasise that she is *only* an

intercessor to God, it is difficult to understand that she is not a divinity in her own right (Warner, 2000: 330).

Post-reformation Dutch and German painters of the fifteenth century brought a new domestic informality to the depiction of Mary, which was highly influential. However, in the Mannerist and Baroque movements with their emphasis on extravagant style, spiritual substance was lost and by the eighteenth century religious art had become threatened by the Enlightenment (Lloyd 1987: 221). The stock-in-trade of Marian artworks in contemporary Catholic churches and shrine sites is sentimental Victorian reworkings of images from earlier periods, "stripped of their original strength", and images derived from her many appearances (Warner, 2000: 327). These latter emphasise her childlikeness as the symbol of purity and she is rarely portrayed as a mother (Warner, 2000: 302).

Figure 11. Madonna della Clemenza (8th C) (Beckett, 2009: 73)

Maria Regina

Our Lady of the Isles is depicted as a crowned queen. This role goes back to the sixth and seventh centuries when in the "classical tradition of personifying cities and institutions as goddesses," Rome was using the Virgin to establish itself as the Church, with the pope as ruler (Warner, 2000: 104). In the palace chapel of *S. Maria Antiqua* where emperors had petitioned Minerva to protect the city, the Virgin appears as *Maria Regina* in a sixth century fresco. This image is amplified in a huge eighth century icon (fig.11), one of only eight of the Virgin surviving Byzantine iconoclasm, where she is seated on an imperial purple cushion,

crowned and stiff with jewels, with the reigning pope John VII prostrating himself at her feet (Beckett, 2009: 72/78).

Figure 12. Fra Angelico (c.1395-1455) The Coronation of the Virgin (Bernard, 1987: 163)

The Coronation of the Virgin in which she is crowned by her son and seated at his right hand, has its roots in Byzantine imperial imagery but grew to be one of western Christianity's favoured themes (fig.12). Mary as *Queen of Heaven* is based on early eastern tales of 'Dormition' which became the Assumption, in which Mary rose body and soul into heaven (Warner, 2000: 89). Jesus promised that, though human, she will not suffer corruption after death, because she was not corrupt in conception and childbirth (Warner, 2000: 85). The images of the assumption portray her ascension to heaven, her crown the symbol of her triumph over death (Warner, 2000: 89).

The Medieval period was the height of veneration of Mary as *Queen of Heaven*. As an exalted matriarch, this is the period of her most Goddess-like status. However, in political terms, the virgin's queenship lent legitimacy to the emergence of powerful kings in Western Europe (Warner, 2000: xxv). In the great Gothic cathedrals of Western Europe, portrayals of heaven resembled the medieval court (Warner, 2000: 114). "Virgin as queen is scored so deep in the western imagination that many Catholics still think of her as a medieval monarch" and in visitations in late eighteenth century Knock in Ireland and Pontmain in France, she appeared as a crowned thirteenth century noblewoman (Warner, 2000: 115).

Although she had been worshipped as such for more than a thousand years, Mary was declared *Queen of Heaven in* 1954, after The Dogma of the Assumption was proclaimed an article of faith by Pope Pius XII in 1950 (Warner, 2000: 82). 1954 was designated the Marian Year, which Warner sees as an attempt, at a time of crisis and loss of faith in the church, to re-assert Rome's influence through the regal authority of Mary (Warner, 2000: 116). This was the period in which *Our Lady of the Isles* was conceived and the wayside shrines of South Uist were built

Mary as Patron and Protector

Related to her position as *Queen of Heaven* is that of Mary as patron and protector. Both these roles are invoked in *Our Lady of the Isles:* as patron of the South Uist Catholic community and its Gaelic language and culture, and protector from militarisation and rockets; secularisation; and the wild sea. The latter is particularly important in maritime South Uist where many speak of her in this way. "She looks out to sea and protects the sailors and fishermen" says a resident of Carnan (Jordan, 2018). In this she is allied to Mary as *Stella Maris* –originally the goddess Isis, who we will look at later– to whom the principle Barra church *Our Lady Star of the Sea* (fig.11) is dedicated (Warner, 2000: 262). She is

ocean guide, pole star and protectoress of those at sea, both metaphorically as a state of mind and –in these islands– literally, where fishermen risk losing their lives. As Alastair McIntosh says, "the god of the Celt was as the Atlantic", the providing and destroying sea (McIntosh, 2013: 83).

Figure 13. Stained glass in Our Lady Star of the Sea church, Barra (O'Connor, 2018)

Figure 14. Robert Yager: Basilica of the Virgin of Guadelupe (Yager,1996)

Several Madonnas have become patrons and protectors, inextricably entwined with national identity and the fate of their peoples, particularly *Our Lady of Guadelupe* in Mexico. Declared patroness of the country by the Vatican in 1754, her shrine, built on an indigenous sacred site where she appeared to an Indian convert in 1538, is the most visited Marian shrine in the world (fig.14). With native features, she originally legitimised the religion of the colonising Spanish to the native population but in the nineteenth century symbolised national identity in opposition to Spanish power (MacGregor, 2018: 243). In wars with the USA and France her protection was invoked, while she represented the poor and oppressed in the Mexican – secular– revolution of the 1920s and now endures as a national symbol of Mexico, especially for its large diaspora, both indigenous and of Spanish descent (Warner, 2000: 303).

It can be seen in this case how image and myth can carry fluid layers of meaning, and represent contradictory messages, so that *Our Lady of Guadelupe* has been the patron of both the oppressor and the oppressed at different times (MacGregor, 2018: 276).

Another near contemporary and disturbing example of Mary in her patron role, is when a reproduction of *Theotokas of Vladimir* (fig.8), the Byzantium icon which is seen as the protector of the Russian people from their enemies, is shown on Russian news, being kissed by lines of young conscripts on their way to war in Chechnya (Howes, 2007: 26).

Relevant to the symbolic role of *Our Lady of the Isles* as protector of Gaelic culture is *The Black Virgin of Monserrat* near Barcelona. She is the patroness of Catalonia, and Monserrat is the home of Catalan nationalism and scholarship. The language has been preserved in the Benedictine library of *Santa Maria de Montserrat* (built on the site of a temple of Venus) and by the famous boys choir –*L'Escolania*– based there (Begg, 1996: 256).

In looking at *Our Lady of the Isles* within wider island contexts next, the preservation of Gaelic culture will be amongst the issues explored.

Island

Other Marian Sites in Uist and Barra

The island devotion to *Moire* is evident in other statues and shrines in Uist and Barra and several churches dedicated to her. At Garrynamonie, South Uist, *Our Lady of Sorrows* (*Eaglais Màthair nan Dòrainn*) is a stark modernist church built in the mid-1960s and on Benbecula, there is St Mary's Church at Griminish.

The church in Castlebay, Barra, *Our Lady Star of the Sea,* opened in 1888 at a time when Castlebay was a major herring port with attendant increased population, development and wealth (Barra Catholic Church, 2017). It has a beautiful stained-glass triptych window (fig.13)*.* Below the church is a grotto in the rocks with a statue of Mary standing in a boat holding the Christ-child (fig.15) and there is a very similar painted figure within the church.

Figure 15. Our Lady Star of the Sea (O'Connor 2018)

Barra has another statue of *Our Lady of the Sea,* which was also erected in the Marian Year of 1954 (Barra Catholic Church, 2017). She is high on the hillside above Castlebay, where a rough un-signposted climb takes you to the small (5ft) white Carrara marble statue. The Christ-child sits on her shoulder holding a star aloft, looking out to sea (fig.16).

Figure 16. Statue of Our Lady Star of the Sea, Barra (BBC, 2018)

At Northbay, behind St Barr's Church, is a garden grotto with impressive dry-stone walling and a figure based on *Our Lady of Lourdes*. Vatersay has a church called *Our Lady of the Waves and St John* and on Eriskay there is a roadside shrine dedicated to *Our Lady of Fatima* on the site of the original Catholic Church.

The Contexts of Geography and Religion

We have been looking at the Roman Catholicism of South Uist. However the Outer Hebrides are better known for a very austere form of Protestant Presbyterian Christianity practised in Lewis, Harris and North Uist. Reforming 'Westminster Calvinism' was brought to these isles

through Cromwell's invasion of Lewis in 1653 and took root (McIntosh, 2013:21-23). A religion soley based on the Bible, Protestantism destroyed the image of Mary, the "only surrogate Mother Goddess in all of Western culture" as Leonard Shlain describes her (Shlain, 1998: 375). That a strongly Marian form of Roman Catholicism in South Uist has operated, apparently peaceably, alongside a strongly Calvinist community in North Uist is particularly interesting. It is surprising that there appear to have been no studies of this, given the troubled history of sectarianism in the British Isles.

The Harris based historian, Bill Lawson, links the differing island churches to land ownership. Uist belonged to two branches of the MacDonalds; MacDonald of Sleat in Skye who owned North Uist and converted to Presbyterianism during the reformation, while the MacDonalds of Clanranald who owned South Uist and Benbecula, remained Roman Catholic (Lawson, 1999). However, Fr MacDonald and others assert that South Uist was re-evangalised by Irish Franciscans after the reformation (MacDonald, 2018 & McIntosh, 2013: 9). Barra claims to have an unbroken history of Celtic Christianity: "Roman Catholic since the coming of the Celtic saints 1400 years ago" (Barra Catholic Church, 2017). Benbecula then was a sparsely populated mix of denominations (Lawson, 1999) but trading relations were with the south, due to the shorter crossing than to the north. Occasionally marriages took place across the religious divide, but a story is still told of a Benbecula Catholic family's inventive expression of displeasure at their sister making such a union (Ferguson, 2018).

Until WWII the islands of North and South Uist were largely self-contained, as crossings were made by ford or boat, which may have been a contributing factor in the two communities ease of co-existence. A bridge was built in 1942 to connect the military airport in Benbecula with the steamer terminal at Lochboisdale in South Uist and the Benbecula to North Uist causeway was completed in 1960 (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, n.d.).

Contrasting Christian Faiths

Roman Catholic priests, notably Father Allen (1859-1905) of Daliburgh and Eriskay, valued the traditions of their parishioners and collected their songs and stories (Campbell, 1954). They were important and influential in the preservation of Gaelic culture and Fr Morrison himself recorded many local singers (Forrest, 2009: 10). In the Presbyterian north many of those traditions were frowned upon, especially music and dancing, and neither musical instruments nor hymns, apart from psalm singing, were permitted in church (Free Presbyterian Publications, 1995). Whilst both faiths are patriarchal, with ministers (in the isles), elders and priests all being men, another visible difference was in funeral traditions, the Presbyterian funeral procession was exclusively male until quite recently, whereas in Catholic funerals the grave was attended by both men and women (Bennett, 2004: 248-250).

The contrasts between these faiths could be interpreted in the binary terms of masculine and feminine, explored by Shlain in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* where he draws parallels between left and right brain modes of perception and the written word and image. Whereas right-brain image perception is holistic, synthetic, simultaneous and concrete, literacy requires a very different way of thinking –linear, sequential, abstract and reductionist – performed by the left-brain (Shlain, 1998:1). Men and women are endowed with both modes, though women have more connecting neural pathways between the two (Shlain, 1998: 23). However, Shlain argues that the dominance of the left-brain and written word, has fostered the patriarchal outlook and diminished the value of the feminine, associated more with the image, through which –as we have seen– the myth of the Virgin Mary has largely been conveyed (Shlain, 1998: 27).

While there is a scant tradition of visual imagery in local Gaelic culture, the oral tradition of poetry, story and song are also non-linear, right brain modes of expression. Presbyterianism

is abstract and reductionist, based on the written word of the Bible, the worship of the one God mediated by Christ alone, without images or decoration within the kirk and no celebration of Christian festivals (Free Presbyterian Publications, 1995).

In the Roman Catholic church, the image has a central place in the worship of the one God through the mediation of Christ, mediated in turn by the Virgin Mary and a panoply of saints. Catholicism celebrates many feast days and holy days and the festivals of Christmas and Easter are central to the liturgical year (Holweck, 1909)

Mary of the Gaels

The particular reverence for Mary in South Uist and Barra that gains full expression in the statue and shrines of the 1950s, seems almost unique in Britain. Father Michael writes about it as specific to Gaelic Catholicism:

> To give honour to the Blessed Virgin Mary is as natural to the people of the Gaeltachd as breathing the air. As well as being expressed in the personal and community prayer of the people, it is also expressed in their language and in their description of everyday things. The Gael sees no boundary between the world of faith and the secular world – everything and every event may be pervaded by the grace of God which in practice is principally obtained through the intercession and protection of Mary, the Mother of God. Especially in times of trouble or threat, the Gael places special reliance on her power of intercession and looks to her for safety and refuge (MacDonald, 2007).

Her name *Moire* is connected with plants, nuts, birds and the life-supporting sea – called *'cuilidh Moire'* (Mary's treasury) and the phrase *A Mhoire* (by Mary) is still on many a Gaelic speaker's lips (Macdonald, n. d.). Historical evidence of this special relationship with *Moire* can be seen in Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica,* in which many hymns, prayers and

incantations, largely collected in the Hebrides, are addressed to her (Carmichael, 1992).

Here the Virgin Mary is invoked in daily rituals such as *smooring* the fire – covering the peat

fire with ashes at night so it can be revived on waking:

"I will smoor the hearth

As Mary would smoor;

The encompassment of Bride and of Mary,

On the fire and on the floor,

And on the household all". (Carmichael, 1992: 95)

Her feast day of August 15th was close to the pre-Christian festival of <u>Lughnasadh</u> or

Lammas (Feast of Bread) which falls halfway between the summer solstice and autumn

equinox and celebrates the grain goddess and the harvest (Walker 1983: 527). In Uist and

Barra a special bannock would be made called *Moilean Moire* (the fatling of Mary) and the

family dressed in their best and singing, *Iolach Mhoire Mhathar* (Paean of Mary Mother),

would circumnavigate fire, home, fields and flock, blessing all (Carmichael 1992: 588). This

places Mary in the tradition of earlier earth mother grain goddesses such as Ceres and

Demeter, the appearance and attributes of whom were incorporated into early Christian

images of Mary (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998:100). She is also connected, through the

Christian Saint Bride, with the Celtic Goddess Brigde, both of whom we will consider next.

The Goddess

St Bride and the Goddess Brigde

Could *Moire* in her relationship to St Bride be a living link with an earlier goddess worshipping culture, traces of which can be found in the overlay of St Bride (or St Brigid) on the pre-Christian Goddess Bride or *Brigde*, a goddess honouring continuum that may have been preserved through the oral nature of Gaelic culture?

It is said that the name Hebrides –*Innis Bhrighde*– derives from St Bride who was an assimilation of the earlier Celtic Goddess Brigde. John MacAuley a historian, folklorist, and native Gael of Harris speaks from the oral tradition:

> …the Outer Isles were committed to the special care of Bridgit, the Celtic goddess of
> fire, whose temples were attended by virgins of noble birth called the 'daughters of
> fire'. When Christianity first came to the isles it proved easier to institute a Christian
> order of the Nuns of St Bridgit than to remove the vestal virgins from their post.
> (MacAuley 1996: 6).

Cille Bhrighde, or Kilbride*, Cill* meaning cell or church, is a common place-name in the isles, referencing this (MacAuley 1996: 7). Bride had many customs and roles ascribed to her, "there were several Brides, Christian and pre-Christian, whose personalities have become confused in the course of the centuries" (Carmichael 1992: 580). Her name comes from the Gaelic for power or authority and she was goddess of fire and metalwork; fertility; medicine and poetry and honoured at the feast of Imbolc on February 1st (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998: 56).

Assimilated into the Celtic church she became St Brigid of Kildare the most revered saint after St Patrick, and patron saint of areas of which she was formerly goddess. In South Uist, at Gerinish, on the road to the rocket range, is the Church of St Bride. In popular legend St

Bride was a midwife to Mary (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998: 56) and according to Fr Michael a wet-nurse to the Christ-child (MacDonald, 2018; Macdonald, n. d.). Both were invoked for protection, as in these words of a Gaelic prayer:

"The quiet Brigit's guarding

The gentle Mary's guarding…

Be shielding me, be aiding me." (Carmichael, 1992: 221)

Figure 17. John Duncan (1913) St Bride (National Galleries of Scotland, n.d.)

St Bride was depicted in 1913 by the Scottish painter John Duncan being carried to Bethlehem by angels on the eve of Christ's birth (fig.17). Duncan was a member of Patrick Geddes' circle who, as part of the movement referred to as *The Celtic Twilight,* revived and re-appropriated Gaelic myths (Shaw, 2005).

Bride was also known as 'Mary of the Gaels' and her feast day of Imbolc became Candlemas. In the wider Christian church this celebrates the purification of Mary, forty days after giving birth but in its candle lighting ceremony continues to reference the fire-goddess role of Brigde (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998: 56). Her symbol was the Cross of Saint Brigid and these are still made at St Bride's or Candlemas from rushes or wool, by many in the Celtic tradition (Campbell 2018). Carmichael describes a beautiful ceremony for St Bride in the Highlands and Islands, where the young women make a decorated corn-sheaf figure of Bride and take her round the houses where special beds have been prepared by the older women, in her honour, and gifts are given in celebration of the first day of spring (Carmichael 1992: 582).

An earlier manifestation of the goddess may be found further north in the landscape of Lewis, with the discovery by the Callanish researcher Margaret Curtis of the alignment of Callanish and many other stone circles with the *Cailleach na Mointeach* (Old Woman of the Moors) also known as *Sleeping Beauty*, an arrangement of hills and valleys that resemble a reclining woman (Cope 1998: 397). Another circle within the complex, *Calanais* III has three differently coloured stones which appear to represent the triple goddess (maiden, mother, crone) aspect of Brighe (Shaw, 2010: 152/3). There are also many references to Brighe in the place names in the area such as Breasclete and Bragar (Cope 1998: 57) and in the naming of wells. These were sacred to the goddess who was immanent in the landscape and some still carry her name, such as *Tobar Brighde* in Melbost, Lewis, whilst others have Mary's name –*Tobar Mhoire* (McIntosh, 2013: 12). While this connection suggests *Moire* is part of a Celtic Goddess continuum, she can also be placed within a wider continuum of mother goddesses, which we will next consider.

In their preface to the *Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, Anne Baring and Jules
Cashford write:

> The Mother Goddess, wherever she is found is an image that inspires and focuses a
>
> perception of the universe as an organic, alive and sacred whole, in which humanity,
>
> the earth, and all life on Earth participate as her children. Everything is woven
>
> together in one cosmic web where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are
>
> related, because all share in the sanctity of the original source (Baring, 1991: xi).

Figure 18. Venus of Laussel (Hitchcock 2015)

One of the earliest carved images of her (fig.18), the so-called *Venus of Laussel*, is a
limestone bas-relief, approximately twenty-five thousand years old, one of many female

images and figurines, many suggestive of fertility, which have been found between the Pyrenees and Siberia (Baring, 1991: 3) Baring and Cashford trace an unbroken, but diminishing, continuum of reverence for the goddess in Western Culture, from these images of the Paleolithic era, through the Mother Goddess of the Neolithic period, to the development of the middle-eastern Mother Goddess and her son-lover, of whom the Virgin Mary is a direct descendant (Baring, 1991: 660).

Figure 19. Isis suckling Horus, (John Hopkins Archaeological Museum 2013)

Her myth is closely modelled on that of the Egyptian Isis (fig.19), Greek Demeter and Sumerian Ishtar, to name but a few virgin mother goddesses of the Bronze age 3300-1250 BC and beyond. They all gave birth to a simultaneously human and divine child; that died, descended to the underworld and was resurrected –a fertility myth that celebrated the cycle of life, death and rebirth of the agricultural year (Baring, 1991: 548). The story of the death and resurrection of Christ, clearly based on elements of these myths, is celebrated at Easter, the spring festival named after the Teutonic Goddess *Eostre* (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1998: 122). Paintings of the Virgin as *Madonna del Latte* refer to images of the Goddess Isis

portrayed suckling her son, Horus (fig.19) (Warner, 2000: 193) and *Stella Maris* was

originally one of Isis' titles (Walker, 1983: 602). The mysterious and especially revered group

of Marian images, the Black Madonnas whose origins and meanings are contested, are

widely thought also to relate to the Goddess Isis (Begg, 1996: 66).

Figure 20. Artemis of Ephesus (Alberti 2011)

After Christ's crucifixion Mary is said to have lived (and perhaps died) in Ephesus, which

was synonymous with the worship of Artemis (Warner 2000: 86). Mary's feast day of August

15th is the same day that the Goddess Artemis was honoured (Shlain 1998: 268). Artemis of

Ephesus (fig.20) was a fertility figure depicted with many breasts, probably an assimilation of

the Anatolian Mother Goddess Cybele (Baring 1991: 329), she was patroness and

protectoress of Ephesus, a role Mary has also fulfilled for many places and peoples
(MacGregor, 2018: 246).

While the Virgin Mary can be seen as a continuation of the Mother Goddess within
Christianity, rather than being Queen of Earth, like her forebears, she is named *Queen of
Heaven* (Baring, 1991: xi) and rather than God the Mother she is named mother of God
(Baring, 1991: 547). However, some of the iconography tells a different story from the words.
In the *Vierge Ouvrante* (fig.21), for example, one of a number of similar pieces of the
fourteenth century, the carved and painted wooden sculpture of Mary opens to reveal the
Holy Trinity within her body, depicting her as the mother of all (Gadon, 1989: 208)

Figure 21. Vierge Ouvrante (Musée de Cluny n.d.)

While the myth of the Virgin Mary is clearly connected to that of the Bronze Age goddesses, pre-historic origins are less clear, so we will now consider the debate around the Great Mother Goddess myth.

The Mother Goddess Myth

The Great Mother Goddess myth and its attendant inference of matriarchal social organisation was part of a complex of late Victorian and early twentieth century ideas that were a reaction to industrialisation and modernity. This was the Romantic movement, valuing nature and the imagination, extolling ideas such as the 'noble savage' and reviving Celtic myth in the *Celtic Twilight,* but also placing human history within the framework of Darwin's ideas of evolution. Matriarchal culture was seen as a primitive antecedent to the more highly evolved patriarchal social organisation (Gadon, 1989: 226).

Writers, such as the father of anthropology, James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890) and Bachofen in *Myth Religion and Mother Right* (1926), maintained that the earliest societies were matriarchal and goddess-worshipping, and that culture itself is the evolutionary struggle to move beyond these primitive beginnings (Gadon, 1989: 226). The fathers of psychology, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, both subscribed to these ideas: Jung in developing his theory of 'Archetypes' –a kind of psychological blueprint–; and Freud in regarding the veneration of the goddess as the "infantile desire to be re-united with the mother" (Gadon, 1989:228).

Robert Briffault in *The Mothers* (1927) took a different view of the premise of primitive matriarchy, seeing women as "innovators of culture" (Gadon, 1989: 227). This was an idea to which archaeologists James Mellaaart and Maria Gimbutas subscribed in their work at Çatalhöyük in Anatolia and several sites in Bulgaria respectively, interpreting their finds as

images of the Mother Goddess and evidence of peaceful goddess-worshiping cultures (Gadon, 1989: 227).

Gimbutas published *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* and *The Language of the Goddess* which were very influential in feminist spirituality, for as Charlene Spretnak, who wrote *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* said, "anthropology tells us that the sex of the deity in a culture usually corresponds with the sex of those governing" (Spretnak cited in Klein, 2009). Gimbutas' work inspired many feminist artists of the 1970s, including Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta and Mary Beth Edelson (Klein, 2009). Within archaeology her scholarship has since been discredited and her interpretations are seen by Lynn Meskell of the Stanford Figurines Project at Çatalhöyük, as "historical fiction" that reflect rigid gender roles that only associate female power with reproduction (Meskell 1995: 75-83). As these instances imply, feminist theorists have both embraced and rejected the Mother Goddess myth (Klein, 2009).

Gimbutas' antecedents have also been discredited, particularly Frazer whose work is now dismissed as "armchair anthropology" (Openshaw, 2018). The development of more rigorous anthropological study challenged the Mother Goddess myth, since no evidence of a matriarchal society has yet been found in the world, although some cultures do have matrilineal descent (Openshaw, 2018)

However, even without evidence of matriarchal social organisation, the Great Goddess myth continues to exist as a "continuous transmission of images throughout history" of imposing and powerful women, whether maiden, mother or crone (Baring, 1991: xi). As a visual artist, this continuum of images is most relevant and inspiring to my own creative practice, which I will explore next.

How does *Our Lady of the Isles* relate to my creative practice?

My particular interest in *Our Lady of the Isles* and the South Uist wayside shrines arises from my Roman Catholic upbringing and my experience of being a mother, both of which are fundamental to my practice as an artist.

As a child, I found comfort in the image of the consoling, forgiving mother figure of the Virgin Mary. Although later as a teenager I chose not to be confirmed because I already had doubts about the church's attitudes to women and to sex, I retained an enduring attachment to *Our Lady.* At difficult times in my life, I have sought the solace of her image in the Lady Chapels of various churches in several cities. As the sculptor Anthony Gormley has said, "The fact is I grew up in a Christian tradition: those things are part not only of my intellectual make up but images of self, that were given to me as a child." (Gormley cited in Hutchinson, 2000: 25)

On becoming a mother, I was dismayed to realise how little this role is honoured in Western culture and turned again to images of the Madonna and Child, seeing Christmas afresh as a celebration of *all* births, not only that of Christ. The image of the crowned, exalted mother is, for me, both a spiritual and political statement which honours the profound initiation of childbirth –which, whatever poststructuralist theorists say about 'gender essentialism' is still a female preserve (Klein, 2009)– and the enormous challenge of mothering which is largely rendered invisible. Where my own artwork diverges from that of the Roman Catholic tradition, is in its respect for female sexuality. Being able to place Mary within a continuum of mother goddesses liberates her, for me, from the sexual repression of the church.

To find through this study, a living continuum of reverence for the divine feminine, specific in these islands, possibly back to the goddess immanent in the landscape, has given me a profound sense of connection between where I live and the preoccupations of my work.

In the postmodern deconstruction of art and of religion, where both have become more about private experience than public discourse, there is no longer a religious setting for contemporary art, as there was in the 1950s commission of *Our Lady of the Isles* (Howes, 2007: 133). However, many artists are individually exploring the sacred in their work and this is central to my practice. The American video and installation artist Bill Viola speaks of "birth and death: the two fundamental images in Christian art" but points out that Christianity "doesn't own" them, they are the essential elements of life, addressed by all great traditions (Kidel, 2002).

My own practice is largely concerned with these themes, an honouring of both birth and death, through the form of the vessel and images of the mother and the goddess (fig.22). My intention is to make images and objects for contemplation. I am inspired by the small scale and intimacy of wayside shrines, those in Uist recalling those in Vallemaggia, as places of focus for private meditation and invocation, accessible to all. Shrines can mediate a personal relationship with the sacred, which is the invitation I wish to extend to the viewer, through my work.

Figure 22. Kirsty O'Connor: Astarte - smoke-fired ceramic (O'Connor 2014)

Conclusion

This study has been an attempt to place my work within the context of where I now live. I have discovered a continuity of expression of reverence for the divine feminine particular to these islands: from the worship of the goddess in the landscape, through Celtic Christianity, to the local Catholicism expressed in *Our Lady of the Isles*. While I see this as a spiritual continuum, I have also come to understand some of the ways in which the myth of the Virgin Mary herself has been used politically.

Her image as matriarch and Queen, patron and protector has been used in the service of different ideas, institutions and people at different times. As the French semiologist, Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies,* in transforming "history into nature" myth serves to normalise that which is in the interests of those who hold power, giving it a "natural and eternal justification" (Barthes, 2000:129 &143). However, the myth of Our Lady has not *only* served the powerful, she has also represented the dispossessed. *Our Lady of The Isles* has symbolised the Roman Catholic Church and the power of the priest; as well as being the protector of crofter's lives and land, and the Mother Goddess pitted against the machinery of war. Her image has had a fluidity of meaning that is, in Neil MacGregor's words in *Living with the Gods,* "well beyond the bounds of language and obvious rationality" (MacGregor, 2018:281)

The myth of the Virgin Mary is undoubtedly problematic for women, having been used by the church fathers as a model of what women should – impossibly – aspire to and this issue, beyond the scope of the present study, suggests further research (Warner, 2000: 338). As does the question of why powerful images of female figures such as the Virgin Mary, Goddesses like Artemis and Britannia, and The Statue of Liberty have symbolised nation, state, and peoples, when women themselves have had very little power in the public domain.

As Warner says of the Virgin Mary, "a goddess is better than no goddess at all" if the alternative is the austere, reductionist Protestantism that excludes the feminine altogether (Warner, 2000: 338). A comment particularly applicable to the contrasting Christian faiths of these islands. I would add that, having discovered how the myth of Mary has evolved and been used, I can see the possibility of her re-invention as *God the Mother*, incorporating the disavowed earth and symbolising its protection, in the care of a mother.

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